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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the careers of four notable Mexican American women, including their educational and family backgrounds, achievements, and importance as role models for young Hispanic women. Marie Acosta-Colon's political activism began as a college student volunteering for presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy in 1968. Active in political theater groups, she became a prominent advocate for funding for the arts and an experienced arts administrator. She directs the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. The first in her family to attend college, Patricia Diaz Dennis became an expert in labor law. She was the second female and the first Latina to serve on the National Labor Relations Board. As a member of the National Network of Hispanic Women, she advises young Mexican Americans to get an education. Like many Mexican Americans, Stella G. Guerra did not speak English when she started school. She worked as hairdresser to finance her college education. She worked as Air Force Deputy for Equal Opportunity and became Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Territorial and International Affairs. She feels it is important for successful women to mentor young Mexican American women. Gloria Molina's political career started as an administrative assistant to a California assemblyman. She was a director in the Department of Health and Human Services under President Carter and served in the California State Assembly, Los Angeles City Council, and Los Angeles Board of Supervisors. She was co-chair of Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. She is tenacious and speaks out against corrupt politicians. (TD)

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NOTABLE MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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Notable Mexican American Women

For centuries, Mexican American women have been fighting for the respect and recognition they deserve. Just a few decades ago, marriage was considered the most normal and satisfying mode of existence for Mexican Americans. In one of my professor's class, we saw a video about the stereotypes about Mexican Americans families, and we learned about "Machismo" or the male dominance, still prevailing in many countries and happening in areas of Latin American. It is well described by the words of American Actor Cary Grant in a film about a Mexican American dictator: "Latin men like to keep their women poor, illiterate, and pregnant." (Taylor, 1992) Exaggerated or not, the author thinks that it is a fact that Mexican American women historically had to tear down barriers within their immediate families before facing the outside world in their fight for self-determination and empowerment. And as time went by, Mexican American women, began to realize that without denying the dignity and importance of their roles in the United States, they needed to acquire a voice in all areas of social, economic, and political issues in this country. Being confined to their homes or to

low paying jobs in garment factories was not sufficient for those Mexican American women who decided to create a place for themselves and their daughters in a white, dominated world. As the author introduces you to some of the most famous Mexican American women, you will see they yearned to be heard in the nation's capital and elsewhere throughout the United States by participating in the political and policy-making process of this country.

Marie Acosta-Colon

Throughout her life, Marie Acosta-Colon has made a point of getting involved, be it on stage or off. Formerly active in the political theater groups, Grupo Mascarones and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Acosta-Colon has become a prominent advocate for Art funding and an experienced Arts Administrator. She has worked extensively for the California Arts council and is the head of the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. She was born December 8th, 1949, the second of five children in her family. Her father was living in the U.S. so she lived in several stated, including Hawaii, but most of her childhood was spent on the West

Coast. Her father, Frank Acosta is a Native American; her mother, Beatrice is Mexican and a homemaker.

Acosta-Colon's political activism began during her college years when she was a political science major at Los Angeles Valley Junior College in Los Angeles, California. In the summer of 1968, she went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago as a volunteer for presidential candidate senator Eugene McCarthy. There she observed the violent police crack down on Anti-Vietnam War demonstrators that alerted the entire nation to the strength of anti-war sentiment that had been building in the late 1960s. (Smith, 1996) During this period, Acosta-Colon begun serving on several art-related panels and boards. In 1980 she was one of the founding members of the Arts Economic Development Consortium of San Francisco. For much of the 1980s, from 1982 to 1984, she was a board member of the People's Coalition in San Francisco. (Smith, 1991) The author believes that her extensive background in the arts as administrator, activists, and advocate has made her a valued participant on many boards. Author also believes that Acosta-Colon is proud of her work that she is doing also that the Mexican community needs a cultural place to call its own. The author also thinks that if people go through a civic or culture center of a city

and do not see something that reflects them, the sense of ownership and contribution is not the same as for people who take it for granted. In 1991, California Assembly speaker Willie Brown named Acosta-Colon the Woman of the year for his district. In 1986, she was selected to serve as an appointee on the San Francisco Mayor's task force on cultural affairs. (Villanueva, 1986).

Patricia Diaz Dennis

Born October 2, 1946, in Santa Rita, a small town outside Silver City, New Mexico, Diaz Dennis is the oldest of five children. With the encouragement of her parents, Diaz Dennis became the first in her. Family to go to college. (Arturo, 1987). During her tenure at ABC, Diaz Dennis accepted a presidential appointment to the National Labor Relations Board, as an independent agency that prevents and remedies unfair labor practices. After extensive interviews, President Reagan nominated her to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and the senate confirmed her; she then moved to Washington, D.C., with her family and become the second female board member and the first Latina in the agency's history. The author believes that Diaz

Dennis' nomination came in as a surprise since no one in Washington paved the way for her. And also that Diaz Dennis had a reputation for fair-mindedness and was an expert in labor law. To many people, Diaz Dennis is that someone with passion and commitment. As career woman, she is known to make decisions thoughtfully, competently, and fairly; she is also a devoted mother of three children. As and active member of the National Network of Hispanic women, she cares deeply about the Hispanic community's problems. According to (Collins, 1987). She spends much of her spare time advising young Mexican Americans that getting an education and being as good as you can be, are the keys to taking advantage of challenges. The author believes very much in her statement because education is the way to a good life, and when you go to school and you get that degree, no one can take it away from you. It is a reward of all those sleepless nights studying, and waking up early to attend classes.

Stella G. Guerra

After her appointment by President Bush, Stella G. Guerra became Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Territorial and International Affairs in 1989. In this position, she was responsible

for coordinating federal policy in the territories of American Samoa, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. She also oversaw all federal programs and funds in the freely associated states of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. (Beverly,1992). Like many other Mexican American children living in the United States, Guerra did not speak English when she started elementary school. In particular, she stated that she remembers always having problems differentiating between the vowels "E" and "I" in words like "Tim" and "team." One day in junior high school, a teacher made her stand in front of the class and repeat those words for more than half an hour. When she was finally able to pronounce them correctly, she was allowed to go home with her classmates (Apocada, 1992). The author thinks that this incident affected her greatly. Because an embarrassing experience like that does something to you, or perhaps the teacher might have been trying to help her understanding how important it is to communicate.

Despite her occasional difficulties with the English language, Guerra was an energetic and out-going girl who was popular with other students. Guerra's school activities included cheerleading and serving in the student council. For being named

the first runner-up in a Miss Texas High School Pageant, Guerra won a free cosmetology course and did not hesitate to take the class even though it meant attending classes on Saturday and through out the summer. The money Guerra earned as a hairdresser helped finance her studies at Texas A&M where she majored in education, art and history. In 1983 Guerra joined the Pentagon as Air Force Deputy for Equal Opportunity. As an acting director of Equal Employment Opportunity, she proclaimed that equal opportunity was for everyone. In addition to her professional responsibilities, Guerra is active in a number of organizations. She is a member of the Board of Directors, and the American Cultural Center and is Advisory Council Co-chair of the Friends of the Arts and the Museum of the Americas (Taylor, 1992).

Guerra's success has not made her forget her modest upbringing nor her Hispanic roots, she is aware of the responsibility she has as a Mexican American role model. The author thinks that Guerra feels that it is important for today's successful women to serve as mentors for young Mexican American women just as the heroes of previous generations did her and others. For Guerra, the term "heroes" has a different connotation than the traditional one, because in her view this word

means something unique to each person. Her heroes, for example, include the grandparents who raised her. Through their innate wisdom and values they passed along. Guerra states that her parents installed in her a love for education and a sense of achievement that she has carried throughout her life. She also had some advice for a young woman starting a career; "Opportunities are always there. We must recognize them but more importantly, take advantage of them. We must stay on focused and never give up, so that we can become all that we want to be. (Appocada, 1996).

Gloria Molina

Gloria Molina's political career has been a series of firsts: the first Mexican American to be elected to the Los Angeles City Council (and only the third Mexican American elected to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the most powerful local government in the country.) She is also the first Latina since 1875 to serve on the Board of Supervisors and the first Latina to be the co-chair of the Campaign Committee of the Democratic Presidential Nominee. In an interview with a *Hispanic Magazine*, Molina characterized the politicians she has known as "people who

don't serve the community. Who do not resolve problems, people who expect to be respected by virtue of their positions, but call them to the table and they don't get involved in partnerships with their constituents. And meanwhile the people are suffering." It was statements like this which led *Hispanic Magazine* in a July 1991 cover story to described Molina as "the configuration fighter, the outsider who asks tough questions, speaks her mind against dirty politicians, and demands answers with an insistence that makes enemies feel attacked by a pit bull that won't let go. The author believes that these attitudes have given Molina a great popularity with the public. Molina's legendary tenacity is the result of her life experiences.

The oldest of Leonardo and Concepcion Molina's ten children, Gloria Molina was born May 31, in 1948, in a suburb of Los Angeles, California. Her parents had migrated from Mexico a year earlier. After attending high school in Pico Rivera, a suburb of Los Angeles, she enrolled in Rio Hondo College to study college to study design. In 1967, when she was 19, Molina's father had an accident and she took a full-time job as a legal assistant to support her family. She continued her education by going to school at night, graduating from East Los Angeles in1968, and attended

California State University, Los Angeles until 1970. In 1971, she became a job counselor for the East Los Angeles community union, an economic development corporation. (Taylor, 1992). The author thinks that Molina came from a family that instilled in her a spirit of conquering the odds. She worked hard to get to where she is right now. It was not easy on her since she had to support her family; her determination to be the best drove her to excel in many ways probably in ways she would never have thought of.

In 1974, Molina took the first step in her professional political career by becoming the administrative assistant to California State Assemblyman Art Torres. Three years later, President Jimmy Carter appointed her as Director for Region Nine of Intergovernmental and Congressional Affairs in the Department of Health and Human Services (Matt, 1988). In 1980, Molina put together the kind of aggressive grassroots campaign that has become her trademark. Her opponent had more money and more endorsements, but in the end, it was Gloria Molina who had the most votes and became the first Mexican American Women ever to be elected to the California State Assembly. Molina's two terms in the assembly established her reputation as a true politician.

In 1987, the city of Los Angeles and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund reached a settlement on gerrymandering suit, which called for the creation of a new Latino City Council seat and a special municipal election to fill the seat. Molina decided to run for the seat and a special municipal election to fill the seat. Molina decided to run for the seat and once again a candidate of the local political establishment, along with two lesser-known candidates opposed her. Molina and her political consultant planned a letter-perfect special election campaign (Nicholas, 1985). With four people running most political observers expected a run-off. Molina won the seat with 57 percent of the vote. The author believes that this marked a change in Molina's thinking about her future.

One of Gloria Molina's goals as a city councilwoman was to make the city departments more responsive to the citizens. When people in her district complained about trash pickups, she followed trash and street sweepers around the district (Nicholas, 1985). She confronted drug dealers on the streets and donated $75,000 from her office budget to create more advocated for safer homes. This was an attempt to organize people to clean their own neighborhoods and take back the streets from gangs and drug

dealers. Molina also worked to develop public and private partnerships to increase affordable housing, improve traffic flow and increase traffic flow and increase open space in the central city. In 1991, Molina decided to run for the Board of Supervisors and was opposed by the man who gave her the first job in politics, Art Torres. Molina won a closely contested race and became the first woman ever elected to the Board of Supervisors in more than one way. She broke the monopoly that white males have had on the job. And changed the political composition from conservative to liberal, and the country bureaucracy discovered that there was a supervisor who would unmercifully grill them if they came to board meetings unprepared to explain their actions or how the taxpayer's money was being spent. Molina's abilities caught the eye of the national Democratic leadership and in July 1992, Democratic Presidential Candidate Bill Clinton appointed her Co-chair of the National Campaign.

In conclusion, Mexican American women have contributed in many ways to the betterment of the United States. Some have achieved fame on the national or international level, while others have had a positive impact locally, changing the world around them and improving life for all Hispanic women in this country.

For example, the country at large might not know a female psychology, there are many other fields of knowledge that have benefited from the achievements of Mexican American women, including education, health, sports, science, or entertainment. The author believes that women who advance in a field of knowledge deserve to be recognized, primarily because they touch the lives of many women who have seen them as examples worth emulating and have subsequently gained national or even international fame. The above Notable Mexican American women described above represent all those women whose lights, large or small, bright or dim, have warmed the hearts of their children, friends, neighbors, and women who struggle to gain excellence and attain it in a large or small ways. These women have made and continue to make the world in which we live a better place for all of us be it locally, nationally and world wide.

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